DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 792 CE 054 586

AUTHOR Brindley, Jane E.
TITLE Retention Strategies: A Pre-Admission Program for Adult Distance Learners.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Making Learning Systems Work Conference (Birmingham, AL, April 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *Access to Information; *Admissions Counseling; Adult Students; *College Programs; Continuing Education; *Distance Education; External Degree Programs; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Nontraditional Education; Open Universities; Orientation Materials; Outreach Programs; Postsecondary Education; *School Orientation; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Athabasca University AB

ABSTRACT

Provision of orientation programs is of primary importance in postsecondary education in order to help students assess themselves in relation to the challenge presented by their chosen program and institution and to develop the skills necessary to meet that challenge. Open institutions using distance teaching methods have a special responsibility to ensure that prospective students are not set up for failure by the promise of accessibility and flexibility. Athabasca University in Edmonton, Ontario, Canada, tries to meet this responsibility by supplying a range of preadmission services that can be delivered through a variety of modes to prospective and new students. These services include: (1) information; (2) orientation; and (3) a self-assessment questionnaire to help students or prospective students determine their reasons for returning to study and the commitment they can make to it. Evaluation of preadmission services is ongoing to ensure that they are meeting student needs. For the future, Athabasca University will attempt to improve preadmission services through increasing accessibility, using new technologies, and taking a more integrated approach. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED317792

Retention Strategies:

A Pre-Admission Program for Adult Distance Learners

paper presented at the
Making Learning Systems Work Conference
Birmingham, April, 1989

Jane E. Brindley, M.A.

Northern Regional Office
Athabasca University
Edmonton, Canada

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J E Brindley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE054566

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Background

Institutions with open admissions policies and flexible learning systems have removed many of the traditional barriers which face adults returning to post-secondary study. In fact, this type of open independent study appears, at first glance, to be a very attractive method of learning which requires less of students than does traditional classroom education. Information which prospective students receive prior to enrolment in a non-traditional institution often emphasizes the characteristics which make that institution unique, such as flexibility, open admissions, ease of enrolments, and self-pacing. The following paragraphs are taken from the Athabasca University calendar which is sent out in response to all inquiries from prospective students. This excerpt is from "Introduction to Athabasca University":

> "Athabasca University makes it possible for adults to earn a university education regardless of where they live or work, or their commitments to careers or families. An open admissions policy (a student must be 18 years of age and a resident of Canada), flexible registration dates and study schedules, and distance education methods provide an opportunity for adults seeking a university education.
>
> Our students learn wherever they choose to. For each course, students use specially designed study materials and are assigned a tutor who can be called toll free from anywhere in Canada....
>
> Courses are designed to allow students:
>
> * to study in their own homes and communities
>
> * to set study and exam schedules to fit their needs
>
> Distance education achieves this flexibility by using a variety of methods to deliver courses: print, telephone, radio, television, laboratories, workshops, computer-assisted learning, audio- and videocassettes, and classroom and teleconference seminars."

This statement from the calendar is true. It is fairly easy to become an Athabasca University student. Systems, policies, and procedures have been designed to allow maximum flexibility and ease of entry for the adult student while still maintaining academic standards.

The Challenge

Unfortunately, accessibility and flexibility are not the only unique characteristics of independent study. We know from experience that many students have enrolled in home study courses without sufficient knowledge of the special rigours and requirements of distance independent study, and without fully assessing their own needs, educational goals, academic preparedness, learning styles or personal support systems. Research has shown that a certain portion of drop-out from distance education courses can be attributed to the "surprise" factor when students find the match between themselves and their chosen institution is less than ideal.

At Athabasca University, the number of students who successfully complete courses is still, on average, only about half of the number who begin. The ideals of an institution such as Athabasca where there is a strong commitment to the removal of barriers from the path of the adult learner must be balanced against the actual experience which it provides for students. A major goal articulated in the current Strategic Academic Plan of the University is to reduce the number of "non-starts", those students who enrol in a course but never show any sign of activity in it. One strategy to meet this goal is to provide a comprehensive pre-admission service.

Pre-Admission Services

In response to the non-start dilemma and to ensure that each student has the opportunity to become informed about their ability to meet the special demands of distance study, the Student Services department at Athabasca University has developed a range of pre-admission services which can be delivered through a variety of modes to prospective and new students. The overall purpose of these services is to help prospective students to define and to meet their educational goals.

(1) Information Services:

Over the past twelve years or so, Student Services has developed a comprehensive information service in order to respond in a consistent and effective way to the hundreds of inquiries received each week by telephone, mail, and in-person. Prospective students need accurate information on which to base their choice of courses, programmes, and mode of study. Information is offered about the opportunities available throughout the entire post-secondary system, not just what Athabasca can offer. Often prospective students have a variety of needs which cannot all be met by Athabasca, or are best met elsewhere.

Providing this type of "educational brokering" service has obvious resource implications for maintenance of an information base, staffing levels, and training. On the other hand, it could be argued that this type of service is not only appropriate but a necessity for institutions committed to accessibility. One of the most formidable barriers facing adults returning to school is locating the necessary information to facilitate entry to an institution which will meet their needs.

Prospective students often have specific and complex questions which must be answered before they can determine whether or not a particular institution is appropriate for them. For example, they may need to know how they can use credit already accumulated to meet their educational goals. In other cases, prospective students are vague about their needs and unfamiliar with post-secondary education. For example, some prospective students approach the institution as a result of job dissatisfaction but are not clear about how further education will help solve their problem. For these students, pre-admission services should include help with defining educational needs.

Accurate information programmes prior to enrolment not only provide a sound base for decision-making but they can also serve to bring prospective students' expectations more in line with reality. For example, information sessions can include statistics about such factors as time required to complete a degree programme, and course completion rates.

Information is provided to prospective students on a wide variety of topics including educational requirements for specific occupations, programme and service offerings at other institutions, course availability, programme requirements, financial assistance, and registration procedures. Referrals are often made to other information sources such as free career services, professional associations, and other educational institutions. Prospective students are also invited to use the resource centres in the regional offices which have a comprehensive collection of career and educational information.

Information services can be accessed through a variety of deliver modes. Prospective students can receive information by mail, telephone or in-person. They can speak with someone individually, or if they have access to a regional office, prospective students can attend one of the regularly scheduled group information sessions. There is no charge for any of these services.

(2) Orientation Service:

The Orientation Service was developed about five years ago to address the need for students to be more prepared for their first home study course. The programme helps them to assess themselves as well as the institution early in the admission process. Specifically, the Orientation programme addresses four major issues: 1) the student's readiness to return to study, 2) the potential time and role conflicts faced by adult students, 3) efficiency of study techniques, and 4) maintenance of motivation. In each case, there is a self-assessment component which allows the student to see how well his or her characteristics fit institutional demands. An important component of this program is the opportunity to share the experiences of those who have taken courses. Prospective students can take stock of themselves in light of information provided about current students in the form of written information, descriptive statistics, and audio or video tapes of students discussing their experiences as distance learners.

Through the Orientation programme, there is an attempt to provide a balance between support for the students decision to enrol and encouragement for them to assess themselves honestly in the context of the realities of learning at a distance. It is important to note that assessment methods are not limited to traditional areas such as aptitudes, but rather focus on such factors as characteristics and circumstances needed for success, hurdles to surmount, lifestyle, readiness for change, reactions of significant others to the return to study, study strategies, and methods for self-maintenance.

In each case, the prospective student is given at least an introduction to ways in which they can develop the skills and resources required to succeed. For example, the section which deals with the support of significant others introduces negotiating skills, and assertiveness training to teach prospective students the importance of openly enlisting the help of others in pursuing their educational goals.

The Orientation programme also covers basic information which the student may find useful such as an overview of institutional structure, a list of resources and staff who can help, instructions on how to use a library, study strategies, and stress management techniques. Wherever appropriate, the prospective student is referred to other services offered such as career counselling, diagnostic skills assessment such as the Writing Competence Test or the Math Skills Questionnaire, academic advising, or financial

aid advising.

The Orientation programme is delivered to individuals through a packaged format containing written materials, exercises, and an audio tape. The package can be used independently or can be supplemented by counsellor support provided by telephone or in-person. Alternatively prospective students can attend regularly scheduled half-day group workshops which use the packaged materials and video component. The workshops are led by a counsellor. The Orientation programme is offered free to all students and prospective students.

(3) Self-Assessment Questionnaire:

The Self-Assessment Questionnaire is the most recent addition to the pre-admission services offered at Athabasca. It is designed to catch the prospective student at the first point of contact with the institution to help them to assess whether Athabasca University is the right institution to help them meet their goals. It is a short questionnaire included with the course catalogue which is sent in response to every inquiry. It addresses four of the major issues which students have identified as crucial to success in completing courses: clarity of educational goals, level of commitment, amount of support from others, and academic preparation.

The Orientation programme, although it appears to be effective for those who take advantage of it, is not required for entry to a course and therefore only a minority of prospective students take advantage of it. As well, it is too comprehensive, (and expensive) to hand out in response to every inquiry, and it is designed for individuals who are further along in the decision-making process, and are willing to invest a fair amount of time working through the package or who are willing to attend the workshop. The Self-Assessment Questionnaire, on the other hand, is a 13-page booklet which someone can read and work through in less than twenty minutes. Using a simple "yes/no" format, the questionnaire leads prospective students through a series of straight forward questions designed to help them carefully assess the reasons why they are considering returning to study; their willingness and ability to commit the time, energy and motivation necessary for home study; the level of support which they can expect for their studies from family, friends and employer, and their academic preparedness for university. At the very least, it is hoped that the questionnaire prompts prospective students to consider these issues in making a decision about enrolment. The questionnaire also encourages

them to take advantage of other services such as career planning, orientation, diagnostic tests, and study skills assistance. The Self-Assessment Questionnaire is provided free of charge in the course catalogue to everyone who makes an inquiry.

Evaluation of Services

Evaluation is a very important part of offering services in terms of maintaining quality, planning and decision-making about the most effective use of resources, and justification for services within the broader context of the distribution of resources across the institution.

Evaluation of the pre-admissions services is carried out in a variety of ways to assess student satisfaction, user rates, staff performance, cost effectiveness, and effectiveness in terms of results (eg. student behaviour). The latter is, of course, the most difficult to measure.

Information services have been evaluated using periodic spot checks. Records are kept for a given week of each call to a prospective or current student made in response to an inquiry. An outside person is then hired to call the inquirers back and to ask them a set of questions about their level of satisfaction with the information service and whether they were able to act on the basis of it. Results of these spot checks are compiled, circulated to staff and discussed so that any needed improvements can be made.

The Orientation Guidebook which is central to the orientation services contains an evaluation questionnaire which the student voluntarily returns. It asks specific questions about new knowledge and skills acquired, how the Guidebook might be improved, areas of most help, and whether they would recommend the Guidebook to someone else. A similar questionnaire is handed out at the end of each orientation workshop. Results are compiled on computer and are used to make improvements to the programme.

The most recent addition to the pre-admission services, the Self-Assessment Questionnaire, has not yet been evaluated but will be this year as part of a larger quality of service evaluation. A large sample of students will be surveyed about one month after enrolment. They will be asked whether they used the Self-Assessment Questionnaire and, if so, how effective it was.

Once every year or two, a more in-depth survey such as the latter one described above is conducted to determine usage

and quality of all services provided. These types of surveys are also very helpful in determining what type of student is making use of various services. If desired, students can be tracked individually and service usage can be compared to completion rates or other measures of student behaviour such as handing in the first assignment or tutor contact.

Challenge for the Future

1) Accessibility:

Although the overall findings of evaluations carried out show that most students who have used the services are more than satisfied, it is disturbing to note that only a minority of students use them. It appears from interview information that many students know very little about the services available to them. A major challenge then, is to find out why this is the case and to market the services more effectively. There will not be a major impact on completion rates until more students take advantage of existing services.

2) New Technologies:

There are many new media available with which to deliver services. Currently, we rely solely on print, telephone, face-to-face, and audio and video tape. Our next planned step is to design interactive software which will enable prospective students at a remote location to provide information about themselves in response to specific questions of the type in the self-assessment questionnaire, and, similarly to a computer-based career planning programme, to be given information and directed to other services in response to the way in which they answer the questions. Potentially, we can reach greater numbers of prospective students more quickly and with better cost efficiency by using the computer. We will also evaluate the effectiveness of the new systems relative to the print-based package in terms of impact and student satisfaction.

3) A More Integrated Approach:

The pre-admission services have been developed over time in response to the perceived and expressed needs of students to be better prepared for the rigours of distance study. There is a strong feeling that none of the services should be compulsory because of the heterogeneous nature of the student body which will always include some who have no need for a pre-admission service. For example, some experienced students from other institutions take just one course to complete a degree

requirement elsewhere.

However, every year, more students are choosing to take an entire degree or a sizeable portion thereof by home study. For these students, we are now considering a more integrated comprehensive programme which combines all of the current services into a non-credit preparatory course designed to help students acquire the skills and knowledge they will need to be successful distance learners before they embark on their studies in order to give them the best opportunity for success.

Summary

In any post-secondary institution, provision of orientation programmes is of primary importance in order to help students to assess themselves in relation to the challenge presented by their chosen programme and institution, and to develop the skills necessary in order to meet that challenge. Open institutions employing distance teaching methods have a special responsibility to ensure that prospective students are not set up for failure by the promise of accessibility and flexibility. Rather, we must ensure as much as possible that prospective students have the best opportunity for success by being fully informed about themselves, their resources and their chosen institution before they embark on their studies.